



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Two Realities

Clay Nelson © 19th April 2020

My musings this week have been about the nature of reality. To my surprise I realised reality is as slippery as an eel. As the video of the woman speaking to her future self makes clear reality has no permanence. There is no guarantee that today's reality will be tomorrow's. Just ask Scottish author Peter May. The screenwriter-turned-novelist wrote a book titled "Lockdown" in 2005 about a global pandemic. The book was rejected by publishers at the time for being too unrealistic. Fifteen years later, that's our reality due to coronavirus, which has so far infected at least two million people globally. That's a million more since we celebrated Easter last Sunday. May's book is now being published. Today's reality has made it disturbingly realistic.

It is the first time in human history we are all sharing a specific reality at the same time. That is the first reality. The second is we are all experiencing it differently. Some are sick with it, some have lost a loved one. Some are living alone in lockdown feeling isolated while parents are negotiating technology to aid their children's home learning. Some are risking their lives and their loved ones to feed us, teach us, transport us, and heal us while others of us remain safely cocooned in our bubbles. Some are learning to work at home while others wonder how they will pay the rent after their job disappeared overnight. Some of us live in Italy, Spain or the US and some of us live in New Zealand. You get the point. There are a multitude of realities ensconced in the one reality of a global pandemic.

From these two realities my musings turned to what our future reality might be. I did a Google search and the key words I used produced a lengthy list, but the second item was a sermon I gave to Auckland Unitarians in 2006 entitled "A Theology of Accidents". I'm sure you remember it as it was my first sermon in our pulpit. Not sure how it was received as the sermon can only be found on St Matthew-in-the-city's website <https://www.stmatthews.nz/sermon-06/i3pqv5p26/Theology-of-Accidents>.

In the sermon I shared a conversation with an Auckland University professor of Computational Biology and Informatics. That means he studies how animals and plants evolved to their present state, which requires analysing an immense amount of data that can only be handled by large computers. I asked him if he only studied the past or if he attempted to predict how species might evolve? He shared that predicting evolution is the Holy Grail for scientists like him. He said, it was one thing

to study what accidents in nature resulted in changes to a species; predicting what accidents might occur in the future and how they would impact a species' evolution had far too many variables to be calculated at this time.

From this I conclude that predicting our future reality is as futile as arguing with our present one. We will lose 100% of the time. Let me offer an example from the sermon that I keep in my “who could’ve guessed?” file.

Charles Darwin by accident of birth was born into a Unitarian and Anglican mixed marriage, but in spite of a family full of free thinkers he did not doubt the literal truth of the Bible. He studied Anglican theology to become a clergyman only after neglecting his studies to become a physician. As luck would have it most naturalists at the time were Anglican clergy who apparently had the time to wander the woods studying God's creation. In his studies he became convinced by William Paley's *argument* that design in nature proved the existence of God. However, his beliefs began to shift during his time on board *HMS Beagle*. He questioned what he saw — wondering, for example, at beautiful deep-ocean creatures created where no one could see them, and shuddering at the sight of a wasp paralysing caterpillars as live food for its eggs; he saw the latter as contradicting Paley's vision of beneficent design. While on the *Beagle* Darwin was quite orthodox and would quote the Bible as an authority on morality, but had come to see through the study of geology the history of creation in the Hebrew scriptures as being false and untrustworthy.

Upon his return, he investigated *transmutation of species*. He knew that his clerical naturalist friends thought this a bestial heresy, undermining miraculous justifications for the social order, and knew that such revolutionary ideas were especially unwelcome at a time when the Church of England's established position was under attack from radical Dissenters and atheists — that is, us. While secretly developing his theory of *natural selection*, Darwin even wrote of religion as a *tribal* survival strategy, though he still believed that God was the ultimate lawgiver. His belief continued to dwindle over time, and with the death of his daughter Annie in 1851, Darwin finally lost all faith in Christianity. He continued to give support to the local church and help with parish work, but on Sundays would go for a walk while his family attended church.

I suppose it is the accidents of faith that led Charles into agnosticism that have made conservative Christians so adamant in their opposition to his theories.

But I wonder where Darwin's faith might've ended up if his accidents of faith had included encounters with modern thinkers Karen Armstrong, Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt, and Jack Spong? Their ideas include seeing the God who is a supernatural being in a three-tiered universe as a human

construct that is no longer valid or useful, the divinity of Jesus being at best a fourth century explanation of his unique human qualities that continue to impact the world, that God was a metaphor for humanity living life without fear and with integrity, loving wastefully, and being fully one with the rest of the creation. Charles might have marvelled at how his theories had not killed religion but helped set it free of an oppressive understanding of God.

Thanks to Darwin many of us now believe ultimate reality is a moving target, ever-changing. Creation was not a single act of the past but is an on-going event in which we are both being created and creating. Our purpose appears to be a willingness to engage that reality, much like going on a journey, traveling light, carrying with us only our capacity to love, to imagine and to create. That is our act of faith. For us God is merely a metaphor for this journey. One could argue that it will only be with the extinction of our species that this God will die.

Let us journey on.